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NEWS ANALYSIS

Bush Is Seeking Newer, Smaller Nuclear Bombs

Cold War-era devices are too big to be a believable deterrent, and the U.S. needs options to confront current threats, proponents say.

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WASHINGTON -- A dozen years after the Cold War's close raised hopes for an end to the nuclear threat, the Bush administration is embarking on a quest for a new generation of nuclear bombs that are smaller, less powerful — and that the Pentagon might actually use in battle.

In the administration's view, the frightening size of Cold War strategic nuclear weapons diminishes their deterrent value today: No one believes that the United States would use them against a smaller foe. As a result, they argue, the United States needs the option of smaller nuclear weapons to deter the terrorist groups and rogue states, such as North Korea, that are today's foremost dangers.

Although officials insist that they have no present plans to build such bombs, recent steps make it clear that they want to fully explore their options, and get the deteriorating U.S. nuclear weapons complex in shape so they could move to quickly develop and test such arms, if the order comes.

This month, the administration is taking a step toward a new generation of weapons as Congress moves to repeal a 10-year-old ban on the development of small nuclear arms. Over the protests of outnumbered arms control advocates, the Senate Armed Services Committee on Friday voted 15 to 10 to lift the ban; the repeal language is expected to survive as the defense authorization bill moves through the full House and Senate this month.

In the same bill, the Senate committee approved $15.5 million to conduct further research on a huge nuclear weapon, called the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, that would be used to destroy deeply buried targets such as weapons stockpiles or enemy leadership sites.

The panel agreed to spend $6 million to research other advanced nuclear weapons concepts. And it earmarked $25 million to enable the Pentagon to resume, if necessary, the nuclear weapons testing that President Clinton suspended.

The moves dismay arms control advocates.

They fear that by developing small nuclear weapons that could be used in battle, the United States is legitimizing weapons that have been all but unthinkable, encouraging other countries to build nuclear arsenals, and undermining arms control treaties. They maintain that such bombs aren't even needed, because of the enormous capabilities of conventional precision munitions.

When Congress imposed the ban on small nuclear arms in 1993, it appeared to take one more step away from the age of nuclear weapons.

The United States already had disposed of most of its smaller, or tactical, nuclear weapons, and U.S. and Russian officials were busy negotiating to get rid of the thousands of strategic nuclear weapons as well.

Other states of the former Soviet Union were taking steps to get rid of their weapons, and it was widely understood around the globe that having a nuclear arsenal was an obstacle to countries joining the prosperous Western world. It appeared that nuclear weapons would be, at most, a secondary security issue.

Yet these hopes began to fade as the 1990s ended and it became clear that unstable Third World regimes still coveted the bomb.

Pakistan tested its first nuclear weapon in 1998. There were signs of increasingly international traffic in nuclear materials, and worries about the nuclear aspirations of such states as Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

Even before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, U.S. officials grew alarmed that nuclear bombs might fall into the hands of groups such as Al Qaeda, which sought martyrdom, and might not be deterred at all.

When President Bush took office, it was soon clear that he and many on his team had a different view of nuclear weapons.

Bush trumpeted his desire to sharply cut the U.S. and Russian strategic arsenals, and he signed a Treaty of Moscow under which the countries pledged to cut their strategic arsenals by two-thirds over 10 years.

Yet arms experts note that unlike other recent presidents — including Ronald Reagan — Bush did not declare his desire for a world free of nuclear arms.

And while there are differing views within the administration on arms issues, many senior officials have made no secret, in previous careers, of their doubts about arms control treaties. These include John Bolton, undersecretary of State for arms control and international security, and Douglas J. Feith, undersecretary of Defense for policy.

The administration says it is committed to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty of 1970, which aims to limit the spread of nuclear technology. Last week, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell issued a statement praising its goals.

But privately, many administration officials say the treaty's weakness is evident in the cheating by North

Korea. They contend the treaty can't restrain any country that seriously wants to break the rules.

The administration withdrew last year from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia, which had prohibited defenses against long-range missiles in hopes the step would discourage a nuclear arms race. The administration has also refused to push the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which seeks to ban testing as a way to block the building of nuclear arsenals.

As they have expressed doubts about traditional arms control, officials have sketched out their thinking on nuclear policy.

In its Nuclear Posture Review of 2001, the administration urged development of a wide range of new nuclear capabilities, and said the United States might in some circumstances use nuclear weapons against countries that do not have them: Syria, Libya, Iran and Iraq. It said the United State should consider moving preemptively against countries that are developing chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.

Administration officials also believe that they need to be flexible in developing and using nuclear force because in the new environment, threats may develop quickly and come from unexpected quarters.

"The nuclear weapons enterprise has to be ready to respond rapidly and decisively," Linton F. Brooks, acting administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, told a congressional committee last month.

As part of that effort, the administration has been pouring money back into the nuclear weapons manufacturing complex, which maintains the remaining weapons stockpile at numerous sites around the U.S.

Spending on the nuclear complex averaged $4.2 billion a year during the Cold War, and bottomed out at $3 billion in 1995. This year, the administration is proposing to raise spending to $6.4 billion on the complex, which has about 100,000 employees.

Included is spending to refurbish various labs and facilities, to buy new plutonium cores for nuclear warheads, and to restart production of tritium, a gas that increases the force of thermonuclear explosions.

"There are upgrades all across the complex," said Stephen I. Schwartz, publisher of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.

Opponents can try to stop any new bomb-making program by holding up appropriations for research, development and manufacture.

But arms control advocates acknowledge that's harder than it seems. Since many lawmakers see nothing wrong with research and development, and once a weapons program is big enough to provide large numbers of jobs, it gains broad political support.